

Notes and Queries

An Animate Archive: New Voices Join the Chorus

RONALD C. WILLIAMS, JR.

A COMMON CHARACTERIZATION of physical archives imagines dark, silent vaults filled with ancient manuscripts and lifeless ephemera. My experience, both in Hawai'i and abroad, has universally been the inverse. Archives are places filled to the rafters with vibrant and intent voices. Within historical repositories, I've heard the progressive voices of the Kānaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiians) of Hui Kālai'āina: a national political association that in 1890 drafted the document, now held by the Hawaiian Historical Society, that proposed a constitutional amendment introducing women's suffrage to the Hawaiian Kingdom.¹ I've heard the sorrow-filled voices of Kauikeaouli (Kamehameha III), Ka'ahumanu, and Kālaimoku relaying the tragic news of the death of Liholiho (Kamehameha II) to his sister Nā'hi'ena'ena in an 1825 letter held by the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library (HMCS).² And I've listened to the voice of an anxious Kanaka 'Ōiwi sailor, held in San Francisco prison in 1863—charged with two murders that he did not commit—that emanates from Circuit Court records within the US National Archives at San Francisco.³ Archives are indeed alive with vivid narrators from the

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past. A recent gift to one of Hawai'i's most significant caretakers of historical voice reaffirms the fact with a poignant vitality.

PROTECTING AND PLATFORMING HAWAI'I'S PAST

"The preservers of history are as heroic as its makers."

—Pat Neff

In March of 2016, an exceedingly significant collection of historical documents held by a private family since 1938—initially on Maui and subsequently on O'ahu—was gifted to HMCS.⁴ The assemblage of personal manuscripts, government papers, and diplomatic correspondence was originally amassed by William Owen Smith (1848–1929), Attorney General for the Provisional Government, Republic, and Territory of Hawai'i (1893–1899).⁵ After accessioning the collection, Executive Director Thomas Woods, understanding its significance, made the decision, with board approval, to begin digitization of the documents in order to offer broad, online access. For the first time in over a century—prior to 1938 the materials were held by the Bishop Trust—these documents would be available to the public.⁶ Curator of Archives/Librarian John Barker began the digitization process, and soon a portion of the most historically significant papers within the collection, and arguably in nineteenth-century Hawaiian history, became accessible around the world. Among the extraordinary documents now available is a collection of original diplomatic correspondence and legal papers produced during the January 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Monarchy. One particular piece, unseen by the general public since its use in the events it describes, holds value far beyond the purely historical.

THE VOICE OF A NATION

The history of the Hawaiian Islands includes an extraordinary record of political transformation from absolute monarchical rule to constitutional monarchy beginning in the 1830s.⁷ The resultant internationally-recognized government was brought to an end by coup de main in 1893, replaced by a minority oligarchy.⁸ On 17 January 1893, political opponents of Queen Lili'uokalani, who were seeking the

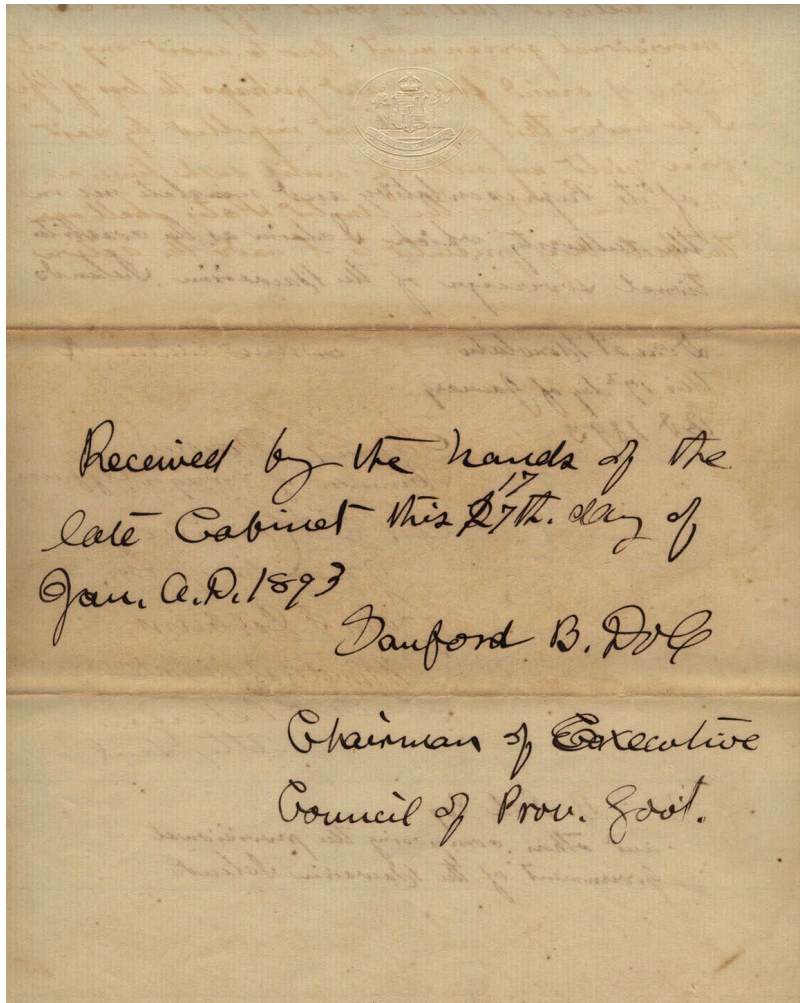
annexation of the Islands to the United States, proclaimed an abrogation of the monarchy and the establishment of a provisional government. At 6 pm that evening, the last reigning monarch of Hawai'i put pen to paper and authored a formal diplomatic protest that resonates for many today as an inspiring example of resistance to injustice.

The 17 January 1893 letter of Her Hawaiian Majesty Queen Lili'uokalani reads:

I, Liliuokalani, by the Grace of God and under the constitution of the Hawaiian Kingdom Queen, do hereby solemnly protest against any and all acts done against myself and the constitutional government of the Hawaiian Kingdom by certain persons claiming to have established a provisional government of and for this Kingdom. That I yield to the superior force of the United States of America whose Minister Plenipotentiary His Excellency John L. Stevens has caused United States troops to be landed at Honolulu and declared that he would support the said provisional government. Now to avoid any collision of armed forces and perhaps the loss of life I do under this protest and impelled by said forces yield my authority until such time as the Government of the United States shall upon the facts being presented to it undo the action of its Representative and reinstate me in the authority which I claim as the constitutional sovereign of the Hawaiian Islands.⁹

As a historian specializing in the history of Hawai'i, I had memorized the words of this critical document produced in the midst of the nation's most fundamental challenge. I had read the words many times, reprinted within several sources, including the Queen's own 1898 publication, *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen*.¹⁰ And I had experienced the profound affect that repeating them had on a broad collection of audiences. What neither I, nor almost anyone else over the course of the past century had seen or read, was the original letter. Thanks to the recent gift to HMCS, which included this document and so much more, that story is changing. The landscape of Hawai'i's archives, already bountiful and deep, has been further enriched and enlivened. May it continue to be supported by the public it serves so that these voices continue to be heard forevermore.


The original 17 January 1893 protest letter of Queen Lili'uokalani can be accessed online at: <http://hmha.missionhouses.org/items/show/883>



Page 1:

Received by the hands of the late Cabinet this 17th day of Jan. A.D. 1893


Sanford B. Dole
Chairman of Executive
Council of Prov. Govt.



I, Liliuokalani by the Grace of God
and under the constitution of the Hawaiian
Kingdom Queen do hereby solemnly pro-
test against any and all acts done against
myself and the constitutional government
of the Hawaiian Kingdom by certain persons
claiming to have established a provisional
government of and for this Kingdom.
That I yield to the superior force of the United
States of America whose Minister Plenipotentiary
His Excellency John L. Stephens has caused
United States troops to be landed at Honolulu
and declared that he would support the said
provisional government. Now to avoid any col-
lision of armed forces and perhaps the loss of life
I do under this protest and impelled by said
force yield my authority until such time as
the Government of the United States shall upon
the facts being presented to it undo the action

Page 2:

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of its Representative and reinstate me in
the authority which I claim as the constitu-
tional sovereign of the Hawaiian Islands.

Done at Honolulu Liliuokalani R
this 17th day of January
AD 1893.

Samuel Parker
Minister of Foreign Affairs.
Wm H Cornwell
Minister of Finance
John F. Colburn.
Minister of the Interior.
A. P. Peterson
Atty Genl

To S. B. Dole Esq
and others composing the provisional
government of the Hawaiian Islands

Page 3:

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Attorney General

To S.B. Dole Esq.
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government of the Hawaiian Islands¹¹

NOTES

- ¹ 1890 Hawaiian Kingdom Legislature, *No. 139, An Act to Revise, Amend, Alter, Complete, and Classify the Constitution of the Hawaiian Kingdom*, 19 August 1890, HHS.
- ² Kauikeaouli, Ka'ahumanu, and Kalaimoku to Nāhi'ena'ena, 10 May 1825, HEA Archives, HMM, HMCS.
- ³ *United States v. William Taylor*, California Circuit Court Records, 1862, National Archives and Records Administration, at San Francisco.
- ⁴ A Certificate of Gift was issued in August of 2015 and the transfer was completed in 2016.
- ⁵ William Owen Smith, born in Kōloa, Kaua'i to the missionary couple Millicent and James Smith, entered politics in 1869 and served in a number of positions until his death in 1929. His final commission was to the board of the Public Archives of the Territory of Hawai'i.
- ⁶ The Bishop Trust is a private trust founded by Charles Reed Bishop and is different from the more well-known Bishop Estate Trust that included the Kamehameha Schools as a beneficiary.
- ⁷ Hawai'i became a constitutional monarchy in 1840 with the institution of *Ke Kumukānāwai o Kō Hawai'i Pae 'Āina*, 1840 (The Constitution of the Hawaiian Islands, 1840).
- ⁸ The Kingdom of Hawai'i had been recognized as a sovereign state by England and France in 1843 and, subsequently, dozens of other nations. The Provisional Government of Hawai'i had no elected body and was ruled by an Executive Council.
- ⁹ "Protest of Queen Lili'uokalani, 17 January 1893," W. O. Smith Papers, HMCS, Honolulu.
- ¹⁰ Lili'uokalani, *Hawai'i's Story by Hawai'i's Queen* (Boston: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1898), 387–388.
- ¹¹ "Protest of Queen Lili'uokalani, 17 January 1893," W. O. Smith Papers, HMCS, Honolulu.